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April 27, 2010

**ILLINOIS SUPREME COURT FORMS SPECIAL JUDICIAL ADVISORY
COMMITTEE FOR JUSTICE AND MENTAL HEALTH PLANNING**

Chief Justice Thomas R. Fitzgerald and the Illinois Supreme Court announced Tuesday the creation of a Special Supreme Court Advisory Committee for Justice and Mental Health Planning to maximize the use of court and community resources in aiding the rehabilitation and treatment of accused offenders with mental health issues.

The Committee is generally charged with studying, reviewing and collaborating “on issues and matters related to mental illness and the justice system” with the aim of making recommendations to the Supreme Court.

Specifically, the Supreme Court has asked the Committee to formulate and prioritize recommendations in improving communication, data gathering and information sharing between the mental health and criminal justice systems. It is expected that members of the Committee will participate in the continuing statewide strategic planning process initiated by the Division of Mental Health of the Illinois Department of Human Services.

The Court also asked the committee to identify and consider appropriate diversion models for persons with mental illness and to report on what works best in Mental Health courts in Illinois, including how to continue care for persons with mental illness as they transition from the criminal justice system to mental health services.

Judges appointed to the Committee serve in the counties of Cook, Madison, Rock Island, St. Clair, Kankakee, Macon, Lake, McLean, Kane and Winnebago, but recommendations could affect criminal justice and mental health populations statewide.

The establishment of the 15-person judicial panel is an outgrowth of numerous national and local initiatives on melding the identification and treatment of mental health needs into the criminal justice process. In Illinois, this impetus includes the current operation of 12 mental health courts in Cook County and nine other local jurisdictions in addition to two special veterans courts, where mental health issues increasingly arise.

“There has been a general recognition that untreated persons with mental illness can cause a never-ending cycle of court interventions, especially in the criminal courts,” said Chief Justice Fitzgerald. “This new advisory committee is an effort to use our resources as best we can to provide accused offenders a serious opportunity for rehabilitation and treatment. This is especially true with our veterans who share unique problems that can be dealt with in a single court more effectively than in the general court system.”

The Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts, under Director Cynthia Y. Cobbs, will serve as liaison to the Special Committee and bring its expertise in marshaling stakeholders and social service providers to implementing the concept. Typically, the prosecutor, public defender, probation, medical, mental health and social service providers are involved.

Illinois Appellate Justice Kathryn Zenoff of the 2nd Judicial District was appointed chair of the committee, which is made up of state judges with expertise in the area of mental health or the administration of special courts.

“An overarching goal of the Committee’s work will be to aid the court system’s capacity to plan and deliver justice interventions that effectively manage this special population,” said Director Cobbs. “Integrating a comprehensive package of treatment and social services through the auspices of the courts can clearly change lives and improve the safety and quality of life in Illinois communities.

“There is a great benefit to inviting the advice and recommendations of judges who are experts in the arena of justice and mental health, and whose work will provide ideas to help frame court operations and administration in this area.”

As chief judge of the 17th Circuit before she was appointed to the Appellate Court, Justice Zenoff was instrumental in establishing one of the first mental health courts in Illinois. She has also served as Presiding Judge of the Criminal Division and the Mental Health Court in the 17th Circuit and chaired the community-wide task force that created the problem-solving court.

She is co-chair of the national Judges’ Leadership Initiative on Criminal Justice and Mental Health and testified on “Mental Illness in U.S. Prisons and Jails” last September before the subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee.

“Experience across the nation has demonstrated that traditional court models of case processing are not adequate to address the problems of persons with serious mental illnesses and co-occurring substance abuse disorders who have flooded into our court systems in the past decades since mental institutions were closed,” Justice Zenoff said. “Newer, problem solving approaches seem to be more effective to reduce recidivism through court monitored community based treatment.

“Creation of this committee shows that our Supreme Court recognizes that judges are uniquely positioned and equipped to dialogue with other professionals on these important issues.”

Justice Zenoff said that of the 13 million admissions to local jails in the country in 2007, 2.2 million were persons with serious mental illnesses and 80 percent of these had co-occurring substance abuse disorders.

In Rockford, when Justice Zenoff convened justice and mental health professionals in advance of establishing the Mental Health Court there, 14 percent of the population of the Winnebago County jail had serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and depression, she said.

Formation of the special advisory committee keeps Illinois in the forefront of states seeking and implementing solutions to the problem.

Currently there are 12 operational special courts in Illinois that deal with mental health issues in the criminal court context. Four of these courts are in Cook County. Mental Health courts also operate in Winnebago, Lee, McHenry, Kane, Lake, DuPage, Rock Island and Madison counties.

Additionally, under Chief Judge Ann Callis, Madison County operates a Veterans Court, which was the first of its kind in the state. Cook County also operates a Veterans Court.

“The advantage of these special therapeutic courts is that by assisting people with mental illness who are charged with crimes, they diminish the revolving door between incarceration and release,” said Chief Judge Callis, who also was named to the committee. “They can save taxpayer dollars in housing costs for accused offenders and lead to a safer community by reducing crime. I truly believe it is a win/win situation.”

Other mental health courts are in the planning stages for McLean, Grundy, Will, Peoria and Macon counties.

Chief Judge Elizabeth Robb of the 11th Judicial Circuit, which includes McLean County, has been leading the effort in her community to establish a Mental Health Court, and also was named to the Committee.

“Persons with mental illness are over represented in our local county jails because of a lack of services and awareness of their special needs,” said Chief Judge Robb. “If we find ways to divert them from being inappropriately incarcerated and assure that they can have their illness managed appropriately by medication and having a social support and treatment system in effect we can keep them out of the jails and keep them from committing criminal offenses, as likely happens when they go off their medications or their support system falls apart.”

Other members of the Committee are: Appellate Judge Nathaniel Howse of the First District Appellate Court in Cook County; Circuit Judge Clayton Crane of Cook County; and Associate Judges Mark Ballard, Thomas V. Gainer, Susan Fox Gillis and James Snyder of Cook County.

Committee members outside Cook County are: Circuit Judges Clark Erickson of Kankakee, Katherine McCarthy of Decatur, John Phillips of Waukegan and Timothy Q. Sheldon of St. Charles; and Associate Judges Raymond Conklin of Rock Island and Zina Renea Cruse of Belleville.

As chairman, Justice Zenoff also sees the committee having a strong role in educating and training judges with respect to the special issues in Mental Health courts, Veterans Courts, Drug courts and other therapeutic jurisprudence initiatives.

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